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# Disturbing Divine Behavior

Eric Seibert
*Messiah College*

# PROMOTION ESSAY

**Note to Readers:**

For my promotion essay, I am including a chapter from my book, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*.
The chapter describes the central part of my approach to dealing with problematic portrayals of God in the Old Testament.
I have included the table of contents from the book to help provide some context for where this chapter fits into the larger whole.

Eric Seibert

DISTURBING DIVINE BEHAVIOR
Troubling Old Testament Images of God



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***Further resources including a sample syllabus and comments on using* Disturbing Divine Behavior *in the classroom are available online at www.fortresspress.com/seibert.***



*For Nathan and Rebecca*

*two beautiful children*
*who are gifts from God,*
*and a spectacular source*
*of joy and blessing*

which Old Testament portrayals reveal, and which distort, God's character, and to what extent they do so. But unfortunately, that is not the case. The New Testament contains numerous portrayals of God that are not all compatible with one another. If fact, some seem mutually exclusive. This again requires us to make choices among various images of God to determine which most accurately reveal God's character. Moreover, not all New Testament portrayals of God are unproblematic. Disturbing divine behavior is present in the New Testament as well. In the book of Acts, for example, King Herod's hubris is said to be the cause of his gruesome death, ostensibly by the hand of God.

> On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat on the platform, and delivered a public address to them. The people kept shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a mortal!" And immediately, because he had not given the glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. (Acts 12:21-23)

In this passage, God is portrayed as an "instant executioner," a role God also assumes in several Old Testament passages.[2]

Other potentially problematic portrayals of God are found in the book of Revelation. This is especially true when certain passages are interpreted literalistically and futuristically. Consider the way Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye, coauthors of the best-selling fictional *Left Behind* series, handle a passage like Rev. 20:11-15:

> Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

According to Jenkins and LaHaye, this passage actually "describes the final judgment of unredeemed mankind."[3] If so, then it portrays God using massive violence on an unprecedented scale. In fact, according to Tremper Longman, "no more fearful picture of a vengeful, violent God may be found than that described in Revelation 20:11-15."[4] As Longman sees it: "Those who have moral difficulties with the genocide in the conquest of Canaan should have even more serious difficulties with the final judgment."[5]

Since the New Testament, like the Old, contains various problematic portrayals of God, we cannot simply turn to the New Testament, breathe a sigh of relief, and naively assume that every portrayal accurately represents God's character. If we want to use the New Testament to develop a clear picture of what God is really like, we will need to narrow our focus. To that end, I propose looking at the Gospels and, particularly, at the God Jesus reveals. This holds the key to helping us construct an accurate view of God's character.



## A Christocentric Hermeneutic

In what follows, I will develop a christocentric hermeneutic—or Christ-centered method of interpretation—to address the problem of disturbing divine behavior in the Old Testament.[6] Although a christocentric hermeneutic can function in various ways, I am particularly interested in demonstrating how it can be used to evaluate problematic portrayals of God in the Old Testament.[7] To that end, I will argue that the God Jesus reveals should be the standard, or measuring rod, by which all Old Testament portrayals of God are evaluated. Old Testament portrayals that correspond to the God Jesus reveals should be regarded as trustworthy and reliable reflections of God's character, while those that do not measure up should be regarded as distortions. Using a christocentric hermeneutic in this way employs a principled approach to determining the degree of correspondence between the textual God and the actual God that keeps us from simply making choices based on our own preferences.

The interpretive approach I am proposing rests on two major assumptions, and these need to be identified and discussed before proceeding. First, this approach assumes that God's moral character is most clearly and completely revealed through the person of Jesus. Obviously, some divine attributes, such as God's eternality and omnipresence, are not most clearly revealed through Jesus, since Jesus set these aside to take on human flesh.[8] But the assumption here is not concerned with these kinds of attributes. Rather, it is solely concerned with God's *moral* character. God's moral character refers to such things as God's goodness, mercy, love, and justice, to name but a few. It is the character of God that is revealed in God's interactions with humanity.

This assertion—that God's moral character is most clearly and completely revealed through the person of Jesus—is supported by the New Testament witness in various ways. For example, in the first chapter of John's gospel, we are told that God took on human flesh in the person of Jesus and "dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The incarnation, as Christian theologians refer to this event, yields a unique and unparalleled look into the heart of God. Since Jesus actually *was* God—"in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1)—the incarnation allows us to see God in action. Therefore, the life and teachings of Jesus, God incarnate, provide a definitive revelation of the character of God. As the writer of Colossians puts it, Jesus is "the image of the invisible God"

and the one in whom "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col. 1:15, 19).[9] Jesus is elsewhere described as "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (Heb. 1:3a). If Jesus truly is "the image of the invisible God" and "the exact imprint of God's very being," then it stands to reason that the most reliable picture of God available to us is the one Jesus provides. As C. S. Cowles observes: "In the New Testament, Jesus is not defined by God; rather, God is defined by Jesus. Jesus is the lens through whom a full, balanced, and undistorted view of God's loving heart and gracious purposes may be seen."[10] Accordingly, Jesus becomes "our final authority . . . in determining the true nature and character of God."[11]

New Testament scholar Oscar Cullmann refers to Jesus as "God in his self-revelation."[12] According to John's gospel, this was Jesus' perspective as well. On one occasion, after Philip expresses his desire that Jesus show the Father to the disciples, Jesus replies:

> Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. (John 14:9b-10)

To see Jesus is to see God. A christocentric hermeneutic privileges Jesus not simply because Jesus is the cornerstone of Christian faith but because Jesus provides unparalleled access to the character of God. Practically, this means that the God Jesus reveals will be the standard by which to measure all other portrayals of God. As Anabaptist scholar David Janzen describes it: "The stories that reflect the God revealed in Jesus Christ . . . function as the lens through which we interpret the rest of the biblical material and will be our guide to a truer understanding of the character of God."[13]

Second, this interpretive approach assumes the consistency of God's character. If God's character changed over time, the revelation of Jesus would be partial and incomplete. It would reflect God's character only at a particular point in time. On the other hand, if God's character is consistent and unchanging, then we can be confident that the character of God revealed by Jesus reflects God's true nature. While this does not preclude the possibility that God used different *means* to accomplish things throughout history, it does preclude the possibility that God's essential attributes changed over time. God is not malicious at one time and merciful at another. Rather, there is a fundamental consistency to God's character.

The notion of the consistency of God's character is a key component of Janzen's christocentric hermeneutic, which is based on two concepts: a hermeneutic of obedience to Jesus and trinitarian doctrine. Regarding the latter, he writes: "A specific implication of the trinitarian doctrine is the consistency of God, or the belief that how God acts at one time is consistent with God's action elsewhere."[14] Therefore, he rightly recognizes "that the character of God as God cannot differ fundamentally from God as revealed in Jesus Christ."[15]

If we accept these two assumptions—that Jesus reveals God's character most fully and clearly and that God's character is consistent over time—it stands to reason that the God whom Jesus reveals should be the standard by which all portrayals of God are measured and evaluated. Every image of God, biblical or otherwise, can be judged by Jesus' revelation of God. Portrayals that correspond to the God Jesus reveals should be accepted as accurate reflections of God's nature. Those that stand in tension with Jesus' revelation of God should be regarded as distortions of the same. In the words of Gareth Jones noted earlier: "If a biblical concept corresponds to what we know of God in Christ, it is acceptable, if not, it is invalid."[16] This will be our guiding principle as we address the problem of disturbing divine behavior in Old Testament narratives.

## The Quest for the Historical Jesus

Determining the kind of God Jesus reveals requires us to look closely at Jesus' life and teachings as reported in the Gospels. But doing so immediately raises a potential problem. How can we be sure the literary portrayals of Jesus in the Gospels accurately reflect what Jesus actually said and did? Biblical scholars have invested an enormous amount of time and energy discussing this very question. Some believe it is necessary to differentiate between the historical Jesus (the actual Jesus) and the Christ of faith (the textual Jesus). This has resulted in a series of "quests" to determine which portions of the Gospels reflect what Jesus, the Jew from Nazareth, actually said and did.[17] In their attempt to identify the historical Jesus, scholars have developed various criteria to evaluate Jesus' words and deeds in an effort to distinguish which are authentic and which represent secondary accretions by the Church. The fruit of these efforts is disputed, and some scholars even question the probability (not to mention the usefulness) of trying to discover the historical Jesus.

For the purposes of this study, it is not necessary to enter heavily into this debate, though I do need to provide some context for what follows. First, I agree with the basic premise that some portrayals of Jesus in the Gospels do *not* reflect what Jesus actually said or did. It is unnecessary to assume that everything the Gospels say about Jesus accurately reflects the words and deeds of the historical Jesus. They clearly do not, a point that is quite evident when comparing a parallel account in two or more Gospels. Second, while it is true that the Gospel writers attribute things to Jesus he never said or did, the degree of distortion between the textual Jesus and the actual Jesus is typically far less severe than that which sometimes exists between the textual God and the actual God in the Old Testament.

I think there is a very simple reason for this. The Gospel writers had the benefit of eyewitness accounts of Jesus' miraculous power and authoritative teaching.[18] When writing the Gospels, they could utilize the traditions that had been handed down to them by those who had firsthand experience with Jesus, God in human flesh. The writers of the Old Testament, on the other hand, did not have access to an incarnate deity who lived among them. Instead, they tried to discern the hand of God in historical and natural events and regularly used worldview assumptions typical of their day to do so. Obviously, theirs was a much more difficult task, one open to far more speculation and potential misrepresentation of God's character than what we generally find in the Gospels. Third, despite the presence of inauthentic Jesus sayings in the Gospels, I believe the general portrait of Jesus that emerges is reliable enough to serve as a standard by which to evaluate portrayals of God in the Old Testament and elsewhere. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, it is generally not necessary to make fine distinctions between the textual Jesus and the actual Jesus. Where there are difficulties relevant to our study, they can be handled on a case-by-case basis (and will be given limited attention in appendix A).

## Reintroducing God

My proposal to use the God Jesus reveals as the standard to evaluate literary portrayals of God raises an obvious question: What kind of God does Jesus reveal? I will attempt to answer this question in two ways, first by making some general comments about the God Jesus reveals vis-à-vis the Old Testament, and then by identifying several key characteristics central to Jesus' understanding of God.

To begin, it is important to be absolutely clear about one thing: Christians believe the God Jesus revealed is the same God the Bible describes as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This God was Israel's God, the one Jews and their ancestors worshiped for hundreds of years. Contrary to Marcion's beliefs, the Bible does *not* describe two different supreme beings who share little in common. Marcion was clearly wrong on this point.

What got people's attention—and what got Jesus in a lot of trouble—was that Jesus spoke about their God, the God of Israel, in ways that did not conform to their expectations. He described God in unconventional ways that irritated those who had fixed ideas about who God was and how God behaved. Through both word and deed, Jesus challenged some of their most deeply held theological convictions. He demonstrated how their view of God was fundamentally flawed in certain respects; it was much too exclusive and far too violent. Jesus tried to correct these and other misperceptions by reintroducing God to them.

One way Jesus attempted to help people see God more clearly was by utilizing "Old Testament" stories that revealed positive characteristics of God that were otherwise often overlooked.[19] For instance, consider Jesus' inaugural address in Luke 4.



After quoting a passage from Isaiah and engaging in a brief interchange with his audience, Jesus cites two Old Testament stories—and is nearly killed for doing so! Jesus says:

> But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian. (Luke 4:25-27)

The two stories Jesus refers to—one from 1 Kgs. 17:8-24 and the other from 2 Kgs. 5:1-19—are stories about God's grace toward outsiders during the prophetic ministry of Elijah and Elisha, respectively. They are stories Jesus uses to emphasize God's involvement with—and care for—non-Israelites.

The first story describes God's use of a foreign woman from Sidon to provide for Elijah's physical needs. Her faithfulness in doing so was rewarded by Elijah's presence and her survival. When Elijah first arrived at her doorstep, she had been preparing her last meal, which she planned to eat with her son before they died of starvation. Yet, as long as Elijah remained with her, the food she had to eat and the water she had to drink miraculously multiplied and never ran out. What makes this story so scandalous, especially to first-century Jews, is its emphasis on God's positive involvement with non-Israelites. While God certainly could have used one of the "many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah," God uses a foreigner to sustain the prophet. The second story repeats this same theme. Here the focus is on a man named Naaman, a Syrian army commander, who has leprosy. Once again, despite the presence of many lepers in Israel, it is only this foreigner whom the God of Israel heals.

The God Jesus reveals through these stories is one who is embracing and inclusive rather than parochial or nationalistic. As New Testament scholar Joel Green puts it: "In Jesus' address, the role of Elijah and Elisha as agents of healing to (and thus the exercise of God's grace among) outsiders is paramount."[20] These stories portray God as one whose concern for others crosses traditional boundaries, while emphasizing that the same would be characteristic of Jesus' ministry also. Suffice it to say, Jesus' audience did not receive this message very well.

> When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. (Luke 4:28-29)

Jesus' vision of God was clearly at odds with theirs. Despite the fact that Jesus appealed to Scripture to make his case, his audience did not appreciate what he

was claiming about God. In fact, they found his view of God so threatening that they tried to kill him. Murder seemed an entirely appropriate response to such "blasphemy."

Jesus certainly would have been familiar with a wide range of portrayals of God, including the problematic ones we have been considering in this study. Nevertheless, the more troubling Old Testament images did not govern his view of God. Instead, Jesus embraced other portrayals of God in the Old Testament, such as those found in the stories from 1 and 2 Kings noted above. These alternate portrayals of God—portrayals that offer a counterpoint to the most disturbing depictions of God in the Old Testament—are the ones that seem to have most influenced his thinking about the nature of God.

The God Jesus reveals is not a new deity unconnected to Israel's past but the one already found in the pages of the Old Testament. Jesus attempts to reintroduce this God to the people by correcting certain misperceptions and by emphasizing certain key characteristics that seem to have been overlooked. Jesus does this by selectively using some images of God from the Old Testament while avoiding others altogether. For example, Jesus never speaks of God as one who commands genocide. Nor does he describes God as one who abuses, deceives, or acts unjustly. These unsavory characteristics, which are evident in certain Old Testament portrayals of God, do not factor into Jesus' description of God. On the contrary, we will see that the God Jesus reveals is one who loves enemies and is kind to the wicked.

On occasion, Jesus does refer to certain Old Testament narratives that contain disturbing divine behavior. For example, in Luke 17:26-30, Jesus mentions the worldwide flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah recorded in the book of Genesis. It is interesting to note, however, that Jesus does not explicitly identify God as the cause of either of these disasters. Although his audience presumably would have assumed this to be the case, the way Jesus tells these stories keeps the problem of divine violence in the background. More significantly, it is clear that Jesus' purpose in using these stories was *not* to suggest that God's behavior in these narratives was representative of how God operates *in* history. Instead, Jesus used both stories as analogies that could help people understand what will happen at *the end* of history, when "the Son of Man is revealed" (v. 30).[21] My point here is simply to emphasize that Old Testament narratives containing problematic portrayals of God rarely occur in Jesus' discourse and, when they do, are not used to make theological claims about how God behaves in history.

## The God Jesus Reveals

We are now ready to consider the kind of God Jesus reveals. This can be done by identifying some key characteristics of God that Jesus emphasized through his life and teaching. As noted above, Jesus' understanding of God's character was clearly



influenced by certain Old Testament portrayals of God. Although Jesus typically does not cite particular narratives, much of what he says is compatible with certain Old Testament images of God, and some of these points of continuity will be discussed below. This serves the important function of reminding us that there are many positive and constructive images of God in the Old Testament. Despite the focus of this book, divine behavior in the Old Testament is not always disturbing! On the other hand, it will quickly become obvious that some of the claims Jesus makes about God stand in serious tension with certain Old Testament portrayals of God. While these differences can be disconcerting to many readers, I would argue that it is precisely these points of discontinuity that make a Christocentric hermeneutic so necessary and helpful for dealing responsibly with problematic portrayals of God.

While a fully satisfactory discussion of the kind of God Jesus reveals would require a book all its own, we can develop a rudimentary portrait of Jesus' God by looking at selected gospel passages. This portrait will then become the standard by which all other depictions of God in Scripture, especially the problematic ones, can be evaluated.

### *Jesus Reveals a God Who Is Kind to the Wicked*

One of the first things we notice when looking at the life and teachings of Jesus is that Jesus reveals a God who is kind to the wicked. Hints of divine kindness toward the wicked are not absent from the Old Testament either. Recall the story of Jonah discussed earlier. God calls the prophet Jonah to "go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me" (Jon. 1:2). After a failed attempt to flee from God's presence, Jonah does go as commanded, preaches a very brief sermon, and is dismayed to see the whole city turn to God. On the other hand, "when God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it" (Jon. 3:10). As this story portrays it, God spares a city full of Assyrians—people the Israelites would have considered some of the most wicked in the world—when they repent. Even in the Old Testament, God is sometimes portrayed as one who is kind to the wicked.

Admittedly, this image of God in the Old Testament is often overshadowed by the preponderance of portrayals of God meting out divine devastation on the wicked. Yet, despite the overwhelming presence of these problematic portrayals in the Old Testament, Jesus does not envision God as one who uses lethal force to destroy wicked people. Rather, the God Jesus reveals has more in common with the picture of God that emerges from the book of Jonah. This can be demonstrated in various ways. Embedded in the Sermon on the Mount, we find one of Jesus' most familiar sayings:

> You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (Matt. 5:43-45)

The importance of this verse for understanding Jesus' view of God can hardly be overestimated. Jesus doesn't command his followers to love their enemies just because he thinks it is a good idea. Jesus commands them to love their enemies because that's what God does. Their behavior is to mirror God's behavior. Followers of Jesus are to love enemies and pray for persecutors in order to "be children of your Father in heaven."

It is not uncommon for people who know my dad to look at me and easily recognize me as Laverne's son. For better or worse, we look alike. Similarly, people will know that we are related to God when we behave like God does. And this, fundamentally, involves loving our enemies. We are called to love our enemies because that is exactly what God does. As the apostle Paul reminds us: "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). When people see Christians loving their enemies and see a family resemblance and get a glimpse into the very heart of God.

Jesus further describes God as one who "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." By saying this, Jesus reveals his view of God as one whose blessings extend to everyone. Sunshine and rain, "good gifts" from God, are not reserved for the upright alone; they are extended even to those who are wicked.[22] In a parallel passage in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says:

> But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; *for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.* (Luke 6:35, emphasis mine)

The God Jesus reveals, one who is "kind to the ungrateful and the wicked," is clearly at odds with Old Testament pronouncements declaring God to be "far from the wicked" (Prov. 15:29) and one who "make[s] the wicked stumble" (Zeph. 1:3). Jesus' view of God as one who "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" similarly undermines the psalmist's claim that God hates all evildoers (Ps. 5:5) and that God's face "is against" them (Ps. 34:16).[23]

By what he said and did, Jesus revealed a God who abounds in mercy. This is not surprising since this was part of Israel's core confession about the character of God. Israel celebrated God as one who is "merciful and gracious" (Exod. 34:6). Jesus affirmed this view of God and allowed it to inform his ministry. As Gerd



Lüdemann observes: "At the heart of Jesus' *picture of God* is not the figure of a vengeful, zealous God but one of a God who turns to men and women in mercy."[24] A clear example of this is found in Jesus' treatment of the woman caught in the act of adultery recorded in John 8.[25]

> Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." (John 8:2-11)[26]

Jesus undoubtedly knew what the law required in this situation. This woman and her partner were to be executed. As Lev. 20:10 plainly states: "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death." According to the book of Leviticus, this lethal legislation was a mandate straight from God (see Lev. 20:1). Yet Jesus felt the freedom to ignore it. Why? Apparently, Jesus did not envision God as a "deadly lawgiver." Instead, Jesus recognized God as one who is merciful, gracious, and compassionate. Jesus knew that God desires mercy (Matt. 9:13; 12:7), and this knowledge gave Jesus the freedom to reject the requirements of the law, even one ostensibly given by God. As this incident testifies, the God Jesus reveals is one who deals mercifully, not murderously, with sinners, while still calling them to leave their sinful ways behind.

In fact, when reading through the Gospels, you get the distinct impression that the God Jesus reveals was more interested in eating with sinners than executing them.

> And as he [Jesus] sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who

are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." (Mark 2:15-17)

Jesus was regularly "banqueting with the bad," to borrow an expression from New Testament scholar Ben Witherington.[27] According to Jewish standards of the day, Jesus regularly hung out with the wrong crowd. He ate with sinners, touched lepers, welcomed tax collectors, and even talked to prostitutes! Yet these were the very people whom respected religious figures, familiar with the Old Testament and its problematic portrayals of God, knew to avoid. As Witherington puts is: "That the scribes object to Jesus' behavior . . . is quite understandable in view of some of the things the Old Testament says about the wicked (cf. Ps. 10:15; 141:5; and esp. Prov. 2:22; 10:30; 14:9: 'God scorns the wicked, but the upright enjoys his favor')."[28] Yet Jesus is not bound by these unattractive images of God. Instead, he affirms an alternate vision of God found in the Old Testament—namely, that God is gracious, merciful, and kind to the wicked.

We are so familiar with Jesus' friendship with the "wicked" that we fail to appreciate the scandal his behavior caused. By meeting and eating with such people, by forgiving their sins and welcoming them to participate in the reign of God, Jesus radically challenged some of the most problematic portrayals of God in the Old Testament. The God Jesus reveals is one characterized by a gracious hospitality that will stop at nothing to seek and save those who are not yet participating in the kingdom of God. While it is true that Jesus reveals a God who relentlessly pursues sinners, it is for the purpose of bringing them into the kingdom, not casting them out (see Luke 15). It is a pursuit of love, not punishment. In fact, when God sees even the slightest hint of repentance, the divine arms are wide open. The God Jesus reveals is a friend to sinners, not an enemy. Such a vision of God forces us to reassess those Old Testament portrayals of God that are at odds with these striking images of divine kindness and compassion.

### *Jesus Reveals a God Who Is Nonviolent*

A number of years ago, I stumbled across a book with the intriguing title *Our God Is Nonviolent*. The book, written by a Jesuit priest named John Dear, highlights various practitioners of nonviolence, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Daniel Berrigan, and, of course, Jesus. The book's stated thesis is as follows: "Our God is a God of love and is nonviolent; God calls us to be nonviolent toward one another in order to transform our world of violence and war."[29]

While I imagine most Christians would have no problem speaking of God as a God of love, I wonder how many agree with Dear's declaration that God is nonviolent. Tremper Longman and Daniel Reid certainly do not. After quoting a passage from Isa. 13:6-14, these two biblical scholars begin their article "When God Declares War" with these words: "Isaiah won't let us escape the fact that our God is violent. In fact, Scripture often describes him as a warrior, a warring king who obliterates his enemies."[30] My guess is that many Christians resonate more with Longman and Reid's bold declaration than with Dear's. But is theirs an accurate assessment of the character of God? Is the God whom Jesus reveals violent?[31] I think not.

Time and time again, the life and teachings of Jesus reveal a God who is nonviolent. Recall Jesus' command to love enemies. As stressed earlier, the rationale for this command is rooted in the very nature of God. We are to love enemies because that is what God does. By calling us to love our enemies in imitation of God, Jesus effectively subverts some very popular first-century ideas about the fundamental nature of God's character—ideas, I might add, that had strong "biblical" support. Many Jews living in first-century Palestine looked forward to a day when God would fight on their behalf. They expected God to liberate them from foreign occupation by violently slaughtering their Roman oppressors. But when Jesus called people to love their enemies because God does, Jesus directly challenged their notions of a vengeful deity bent on the destruction of the wicked—in this case, the Romans. In doing so, Jesus invited his hearers to consider an alternative vision of God, one that did not include violence.

Implicitly at least, this is a feature of Jesus' inaugural address in Luke 4. Reading from the scroll of Isaiah, Jesus stops just prior to "getting to the prophetic punch line," as Cowles puts it.[32] The part that Jesus leaves out refers to the much anticipated "day of vengeance" when God would settle accounts with Israel's enemies (Isa. 61:2). According to Cowles, Jesus' "editing of this Scripture passage was not accidental but intentional and . . . represented an entirely new way of thinking about God." Cowles argues that Jesus was engaging in "an entirely new rewrite of Jewish theology" that "would introduce the shocking, unprecedented, and utterly incomprehensible news that God is nonviolent and that he wills the well-being of all humans, beginning with the poor, the oppressed, and the disenfranchised."[33]

As you read through the Gospels, you discover that Jesus never endorses or promotes a view of God as a divine warrior who fights physical battles on behalf of a "chosen people." As New Testament scholar Ben Witherington observes: "The call to throw off the yoke of Roman rule and retake the land is missing in Jesus' message. He did not use (as far as we can tell) the ancient Near Eastern myth of the divine warrior to articulate his vision of the coming dominion of God."[34] Thus, while certain passages in Isaiah might lead one to believe that God is violent, as Longman and Reid contend, it is clearly not the way Jesus understood God.

Jesus himself lived nonviolently throughout his life and ministry. Various stories in the Gospels illustrate Jesus' explicit rejection of violence. Since Jesus was God incarnate, God in human flesh, these stories are instructive and illustrative of the character of God. Jesus' commitment to nonviolence reflects the nonviolence of

God since the character of God is revealed in and through the words and deeds of Jesus. Luke records a very telling story in which Jesus rejects a violent response to an indignity he and his disciples suffer:

> When the days drew near for him [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village. (Luke 9:51-56)

There was no love lost between Jews and Samaritans during the first century. Jews regarded Samaritans as half-breeds, the descendants of those Israelites who had intermarried with foreigners in the land after the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 BCE. As this story clearly illustrates, feelings of animosity ran deep between these two groups. On this occasion, Jesus is heading toward Jerusalem, the Jew's most holy place of worship. The Samaritans, on the other hand, believed Mount Gerizim, rather than Mount Zion (Jerusalem), was the proper place to worship God. Thus, when Jesus and his entourage enter this Samaritan village en route to Jerusalem, these Samaritans refuse to offer them the most basic hospitality of food and lodging. In response to this affront, James and John suggest that the Samaritans be punished for their actions (or lack thereof). Inspired by a violent Old Testament narrative, the disciples ask if they should command fire to come down from heaven to consume these inhospitable "half-breeds."[35] Jesus not only rejects their violent response but also rebukes his disciples in the process. According to some ancient manuscripts, Jesus says, "You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them."[36] As Cowles observes:

> They [the disciples] were ready to consign all of Samaria to destruction because of the inhospitality of a few. Apparently, it never crossed their minds that not only would the recalcitrant males perish but women, children, and the infirm, the very people Jesus had come to redeem. They would have thereby annihilated the woman at the well, who became the gospel's first evangelist, as well as the very people who would be the first beyond Judea to receive and welcome the good news of Christ's resurrection and the first to experience an outpouring of the Holy Spirit after Pentecost.[37]

Jesus rejects this violent option because it is inconsistent with the nature of God and the purpose of the kingdom. The God whom Jesus reveals is not one who goes around slaying sinners.



Jesus' rejection of violence is also strikingly illustrated on the night he is betrayed. As Jesus stands with his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas approaches Jesus and betrays him with a kiss. What happens next once again exemplifies the nonviolence of God revealed through Jesus.

> Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword." (Matt. 26:51-52)

Jesus forbade his disciples from using violence to protect him because he understood the mimetic nature of violence.[38] Jesus knew that violence would only lead to more violence. Violence is contrary not only to the will of God but to the very nature of God. As God incarnate, Jesus' nonviolent words and deeds enable us to see clearly the true nature of God.

The nonviolence of God is most plainly visible in Christ crucified on the cross.[39] Unfortunately, many people have turned this supreme act of nonviolent love into an act of divine violence by suggesting that God (the Father) willed—and thus was ultimately responsible for—the death of Jesus. Throughout the history of the church, various theories of the atonement have been put forward to explain the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross. Today, penal substitutionary atonement is one of the most popular theories held by many Christians. According to this view, the primary reason God sent Jesus to earth was to die on the cross. This theory of the atonement claims that on the cross, Jesus took upon himself the punishment each of us deserved. Jesus' death is what makes the forgiveness of our sins and a relationship with God possible. This theory of the atonement—like many others—maintains that the death of Jesus on the cross was divinely willed violence necessary for our salvation.

While this is not the place to engage in a thorough assessment of this (or any other) theory of the atonement, a few brief comments are in order.[40] One fundamental problem with penal substitutionary atonement is the way it drives a wedge between God the Father and God the Son, essentially maintaining that the Father required the death of the Son to save humanity. In its most troubling rendition, this view sometimes suggests that God the Father poured out all the divine wrath for the sins of humanity upon Jesus. Biblically speaking, such a view is utterly without merit. Penal substitutionary atonement has also been criticized for conceiving of the cross in largely forensic, rather than relational, terms. It regards Jesus' death on the cross as something necessary to settle a matter of cosmic justice without which it would have been impossible for God to forgive sins and be reconciled with humanity.

But this raises some sticky theological questions related to forgiveness and the justice of God. For example, does divine forgiveness require punishment? Moreover,

if Jesus actually paid the debt, in what sense can we speak of this as "forgiveness," especially if forgiveness is understood as being released from a debt that cannot be paid? And in what sense is it just for someone who is innocent to suffer on behalf of someone who is guilty? Despite its popularity, penal substitutionary atonement is problematic at a variety of levels. I do not consider it an appropriate way to understand the significance of Jesus' death.

When attempting to understand the meaning of the cross, it helps to keep in mind that the church has never taken an official position on this issue. While the church has developed established creeds about such things as Jesus' nature—born of a virgin, fully God, fully human, of the same essence as the Father—the church has never done so with regard to the atonement. No ecumenical council has ever declared penal substitutionary atonement—or any other theory for that matter—to be the "orthodox" one.

Today, a growing number of scholars reject theories of the atonement that are predicated upon notions of divine violence. Instead, they understand the significance of Jesus' death in ways that are compatible with a nonviolent view of God.[41] As professor J. Denny Weaver writes:

> Jesus did suffer and die a violent death, but *the violence was neither God's nor God directed. Suffering and dying were not the purpose or goal of Jesus' mission.* Death resulted when Jesus faithfully carried out his life-bringing and life-affirming mission to make the rule of God present and visible. Since saving his life would have meant abandoning his mission, his death was necessary in the sense that faithfulness required that he go through death.[42]

Weaver and others emphasize the significance of Jesus' life. They argue that Jesus came to live, not to die. Death was the tragic—though predictable—result of Jesus' life, a life committed to inaugurating the kingdom of God, God's reign of peace and justice, on earth.

Jesus' willingness to die on the cross for the sake of the truth rather than to use force to preserve his own life speaks volumes about the nonviolent love of God. As Jesus hung on the cross, he spoke words of forgiveness rather than condemnation for those who tortured and crucified him. There is no call to arms or thought of revenge, only words of pardon and release (Luke 23:34). In that moment, we see straight into the heart of God. On the cross, the nonviolent character of God is displayed most dramatically and definitively. It is there we see God as a suffering servant, not a dominating warrior. God liberates by enduring pain, not by inflicting it. As John Dear puts it:

> In the revelation of Jesus, we find that our God is completely nonviolent. . . . Jesus reveals our God to be a suffering God, constantly loving, sacrificing God's self, dying for love of us, suffering the pain and violence we show to God, yet constantly responding to that violence with nonviolent love. This is what Jesus taught and revealed with his life and death and resurrection.[43]



Both Jesus' life and death testify to the nonviolence of God. The fact that Jesus, God among us, never condoned violence, resorted to violence, or encouraged his followers to use violence reveals something profoundly true about the nonviolent nature of God.

Some have disputed the assertion that Jesus was nonviolent.[44] They regard such things as Jesus' dramatic actions in the temple when he overturned tables and drove out moneychangers (Matt 21:12), and his instructions that his followers lacking a sword sell their cloak and purchase one (Luke 22:36), as evidence that Jesus sometimes used and sanctioned violence. Since helpful responses to these and similar objections are readily available, I have chosen not to address them here.[45] In my estimation, when passages like these are properly understood, they are fully consistent with the claim that Jesus was nonviolent.

A potentially more serious objection we have not yet discussed, and that might seem to cast some doubt on the characterization of God as nonviolent, concerns Jesus' teachings about eschatological (end-time) judgment. How does Jesus' teaching about God's judgment of humanity, particularly the fate of those judged unfaithful, relate to this assertion that Jesus reveals a God who is nonviolent? To put it bluntly, how can a God who consigns people to "eternal punishment" be considered nonviolent?[46] This is an important question that needs to considered in some detail. For that reason, I have devoted a significant portion of appendix A to this issue. Anticipating my conclusions, I argue that Jesus' teachings about eschatological judgment are actually less problematic than they initially appear and do not undermine the characterization of God as fundamentally nonviolent.

While it is impossible to know exactly how Jesus' views about the nonviolence of God developed, he would have had some basis for viewing God this way from the opening chapters of the book of Genesis. Here, in the first two chapters, God is portrayed as a nonviolent creator. These texts affirm that when God created the world, whenever and however God actually did that, God created it without using violence. According to Genesis 1, God speaks the world into existence. God says, "Let there be light," and there is light (Gen. 1:3). God says, "Let the dry land appear," and it does (Gen. 1:9). God speaks, and creation happens. Likewise, in Genesis 2, God's creative acts do not require violence of any sort. God forms Adam from the dust. God plants a garden. God makes trees grow. At every point in the creative process, God operates nonviolently.[47]

This image of God as a nonviolent creator is particularly striking and noteworthy when set alongside other ancient Near Eastern creation accounts that routinely include divine violence as an integral part of the story. To cite one celebrated example, consider the Mesopotamian creation story known as the *Enuma Elish*. In this

story, a fearsome goddess named Tiamat plans to kill certain gods because of their complicity in the death of her husband. The god Marduk agrees to fight Tiamat and is victorious. He kills Tiamat and then tears her body into two pieces. Half becomes the earth; the other half, the sky. Order is established, and the world as we know it is formed as a result of this violent act. But the story doesn't end there. Marduk kills Kingu—the ringleader of a group of devilish beings who had aided Tiamat—and Ea, the god of wisdom, uses the blood of this slain demon-god to create human beings. Once again, creation by divine violence is central to this story.

When you consider Genesis 1–2 alongside a story like the *Enuma Elish*, the contrast is striking, especially as it concerns the portrayal of God/the gods in each. Whereas the *Enuma Elish* envisions both the earth and humanity resulting from divine violence, Genesis 1–2 eschews any intimation of the use of violence in the creative process, choosing instead to portray God as a nonviolent creator.

The presence of this nonviolent image of God at the very beginning of the Bible is especially important. As professor J. Richard Middleton contends:

> By its alternative depiction of God's non-violent creative power at the start of the biblical canon, Gen 1 signals the Creator's original intent for shalom and blessing at the outset of human history. . . . As the opening canonical disclosure of God for readers of Scripture, Gen 1 constitutes a normative framework by which we may judge all the violence that pervades the rest of the Bible.[48]

Obviously, the extent to which this particular passage, Genesis 1–2, may have shaped Jesus' views about the nonviolence of God can never be known. But the point I wish to emphasize once again is that the God Jesus reveals stands in continuity with certain Old Testament images of God. While Jesus clearly distances himself from some renderings of God in the Old Testament, others are fully compatible with the way Jesus understands and reveals the character of God.

### *Jesus Reveals a God Who Does Not Judge People by Causing Historical (or Natural) Disasters or Serious Physical Infirmities*

As discussed in chapter 8, Israelites—and people in the ancient world generally—interpreted historical disasters (such as defeat in battle) and natural disasters (such as famine) as signs of divine judgment. Similarly, they believed that people who contracted certain diseases, such as "leprosy," were being punished by God for their misdeeds.[49] Tragedies like these were most commonly understood as signs of divine judgment. This popular notion of divine retribution is challenged by Jesus on more than one occasion. Jesus suggests that neither historical disasters nor physical infirmities should necessarily be interpreted as signs of God's judgment.

One striking example of Jesus' alternative perspective on God's activity in the world in this regard is found in the Gospel of Luke:



> At that very time there were some present who told him [Jesus] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." (Luke 13:1-5)

In this passage, Jesus reflects on two recent tragedies people typically would have regarded as signs of justly merited divine punishment. Yet Jesus directly challenges that kind of thinking. He does not believe that those killed were worse sinners than any of those in his immediate audience, nor does he suggest they had been intentionally targeted by a violent God exacting lethal punishment for their offenses. In both examples—the sacrificial massacre and the collapse of the tower of Siloam—Jesus emphasizes that those who experience such calamity are not "worse sinners" than those who do not. Instead, Jesus asserts that all people stand in need of God's mercy and grace and will experience the consequences of divine judgment ("will perish") unless they repent. As Charles Talbert puts it:

> Just because people pass through life unscathed by suffering they should not assume that therefore they please God. Tragedy is no sure sign of sinfulness, just as absence of tragedy is no sure sign of righteousness. All alike—those whose lives are tragic and those whose lives are tranquil—are sinners and all alike must repent (change directions in life) before God's judgment comes upon them.[50]

Thus, while Jesus certainly does not exclude the reality of divine judgment, he does reject the notion that all personal tragedies are the direct result of divine judgment. Importantly, the divine judgment to which Jesus alludes in verses 3 and 5 is best understood as referring "to the last judgment," not to some kind of earthly calamity such as those referred to in Luke 13.[51]

On another occasion, Jesus and his disciples came across a man who had been born blind. Seeing this man, the disciples ask a revealing question: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). Jesus' disciples automatically assume that this man's physical infirmity was the result of divine punishment. Their interpretation of this man's condition is not surprising since it was commonly assumed that physical suffering resulted from sinful behavior. What is surprising is Jesus' response. His answer to their question—who sinned, this man or his parents?—is "Neither" (John 9:3). Jesus did not interpret this man's blindness as the result of divine punishment for human sin. According to Jesus, that is not the way God operates. Jesus rejected the doctrine of retribution because it was at odds with his understanding of how God works in the world.

The very nature of Jesus' ministry further challenges the notion that God is the kind of being who punishes sinners by inflicting them with serious physical infirmities. As Cowles observes: "It is surely a fact of inexhaustible significance that Jesus never used his supernatural miracle-working power to hurt, maim, coerce, conquer, or destroy."[52] Jesus' ministry was characterized by healing people, extending compassion, blessing children, and, yes, even forgiving sinners. Jesus made the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, and the dead live. The God whom Jesus revealed was one who helped and healed people, not one who relentlessly pursued sinners to harm and kill them.

While this view of God stands in stark contrast with many Old Testament portrayals of God, there are some points of continuity between this Old Testament image and Jesus' understanding of God. Foremost among these is the simple fact that it is God's prerogative to judge sinners. Both Old Testament portrayals and the teachings of Jesus affirm that view of God. Thus, *that* God will judge sinners is not at issue. Rather, what is at issue is *when and how* that judgment will come.[53] In contrast to the Old Testament's insistence that God doles out punishments here and now, Jesus claims that divine judgment occurs at the end of the age. Therefore, Jesus tries to disabuse his hearers of the notion that God's judgment befalls sinners in predictable ways here and now. That unrepentant people will perish and that judgment will come are not in question. What Jesus is saying, however, is that this judgment will not come through direct acts of divine violence in history, the way it is so often portrayed in the Old Testament. Instead, divine reckoning is reserved for a future time, when God, "the judge of all the earth," will "do what is just."[54] In this instance, Jesus challenges a traditional way of understanding God's activity in the world and, in so doing, helps people see the character of God in a different light.

### *Jesus Reveals a God of Love*

Finally, the God whom Jesus reveals is fundamentally characterized by love. This is the most primary characteristic of Jesus' God and the one that undergirds all the others. It is God's love that explains God's nonviolence and kindness to the wicked. It is God's love that restrains God from using lethal force to punish people through natural and historical disasters or serious physical infirmities. While the love of God is certainly evident in numerous Old Testament passages, it is most clearly visible in the person of Jesus. The incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus assure us beyond a doubt that God's primary disposition toward us is loving. This love is not some squishy, sentimental feeling. Rather, it represents a profound and costly choice to be with us and for us. As we read in John 3:16, one of the most well known verses in all the Bible: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."



God wants to be in relationship with us and has gone to great lengths to make that possible.

God's love for us and desire to be in relationship with us is perhaps most poignantly expressed in the well-known parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). In this parable, the God Jesus reveals is one whose love for all people, even those who have sinned grievously, is deep and real. The father in this parable, who symbolically represents God, exemplifies God's love in his response to his youngest son. When this wayward son returns home after going "to a distant country" where "he squandered his property in dissolute living," the father breaks with all Middle Eastern decorum and comes running out of the house to greet him.

> But while he [the wayward son] was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:20b-24)

In this parable, along with two others recorded in Luke 15, Jesus emphasizes God's amazing love for the lost and God's deep desire that they be found.

Numerous other New Testament passages affirm that love is an essential characteristic of God. The writer of Ephesians claims that "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Eph. 2:4-5a). And 1 John 4:8b simply states: "God is love." In fact, our love toward others is grounded in the realization that God "first loved us" (1 John 4:19). It is this God, a God of love, whom Jesus reveals with clarity and power.

The love of God is often on display in the Old Testament, especially—though not exclusively—when it concerns the people of Israel. Israel celebrated and basked in God's committed love toward them. Witness, for example, the antiphonal refrain of Psalm 136, "for his [the Lord's] steadfast love endures forever." We also find specific passages that emphasize the deep love God felt toward the people of Israel. God's tenderness toward Israel is expressed with special poignancy in Hosea 11:

> When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. . . . It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms. . . . I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. (Hos. 11:1, 3-4)

As with the other characteristics of God Jesus reveals, the notion of God as fundamentally loving has its antecedents in the Old Testament.

## Applying the Standard of Jesus

Although more characteristics could be discussed, enough has been said to develop a reasonably clear picture of the God Jesus reveals. Jesus understands God to be kind to the wicked, nonviolent, disinclined to punish people here and now through disasters and physical infirmities, and fundamentally loving. The Christocentric hermeneutic I am advocating suggests that this view of God should function as the standard by which to evaluate all other portrayals of God in Scripture. Since portrayals of God in the Bible can sometimes hinder our efforts to think rightly about God, a Christocentric hermeneutic is essential to help us determine which depictions distort rather than display God's character. Portrayals that correspond to the God Jesus reveals should be considered trustworthy, while those that stand at odds with this view of God should be regarded as unsatisfactory.

Using the God Jesus reveals as a measuring rod to evaluate other depictions of God will inevitably lead to the conclusion that certain Old Testament portrayals only partially reveal God's character while others badly distort it. This means we will sometimes need to reject certain portrayals of God in the Bible as being fundamentally incompatible with God's true nature. For example, when we encounter passages in the Old Testament that portray God commanding or engaging in acts of violence, we should conclude that such portrayals do not accurately reflect how God actually behaves. As Cowles observes: "If ours is a Christlike God, then we can categorically affirm that God is not a destroyer. . . . God does not engage in punitive, redemptive, or sacred violence. . . . God does not proactively use death as an instrument of judgment."[55] God is not a deadly lawgiver, an instant executioner, a mass murderer, a divine warrior, or a genocidal general, despite what many Old Testament texts suggest. These problematic portrayals of God, discussed in chapter 1, do not describe the character of God. Instead, they can largely be viewed as culturally conditioned understandings of God that need to be evaluated—and critiqued—in light of the God Jesus reveals.

If God is fundamentally loving and nonviolent, it stands to reason that God never has—and never will—commission, sanction, or participate in acts of genocide. God never orders one group of people to massacre another. Applying a christocentric hermeneutic to our reading of the Old Testament requires us to say that, regardless of the text's claims, God never commanded the Israelites to commit genocide by slaughtering Canaanites or annihilating Amalekites. Such horrific violence stands against everything God stands for. This is why it is so crucial to distinguish carefully between the textual God and the actual God lest we confuse the two and make God the author of unspeakable evil.

Old Testament portrayals of God commissioning one nation to attack another as divine punishment for their sins must also be understood as culturally conditioned explanations that do not accurately reflect the way God works in the world. As professor Katheryn Darr writes:



> When students ask me what I think about Ezekiel's . . . assertion that Israel's experience of exile, destruction and death at the hands of Nebuchadrezzar's troops was the punishment of a just God, proportionate and thoroughly merited . . . I must suggest that in a world where holocausts happen, we dare not follow Ezekiel when he insists that suffering, alienation and exile are God's just punishments for sin. I do not believe Nebuchadrezzar's destruction of a troublesome vassal [Judah] was God's way of punishing people for sinfulness, whether their own or the sin of the second wilderness generation. In a world where holocausts happen, I must tell Ezekiel, "No, in this, I cannot follow you."[56]

Darr realizes that this portrayal of God is inadequate. It is not a trustworthy reflection of the way God works in the world. God is not in the business of using one nation to punish another. Nor does God take sides in military confrontations. Divine judgment is not worked out on the field of battle.

Using the God Jesus reveals as the standard to judge other portrayals of God allows us to take a major step forward in our efforts to deal responsibly with disturbing divine behavior in the Old Testament. It removes the need to justify God's behavior and helps us recognize that certain portrayals do not reflect what God is actually like. As we begin to see God through the lens of Jesus, we realize there are times when we simply must say, "This is not God!" God is not in the business of acting unjustly, abusing people, or perpetuating acts of violence. Whenever we encounter portrayals of God engaging in such behaviors, we must unambiguously declare that God never did (or willed) such terrible things. Literary descriptions of God like these do not faithfully reveal who God really is. Therefore, instead of rushing to God's defense, attempting to explain why God was justified to act in such ethically and morally problematic ways, we should acknowledge that these portrayals do not display God's true nature.

## Domesticating God?

Some might question whether my proposal to apply a christocentric hermeneutic to problematic portrayals of God is motivated by a desire to remake God in my own image, by rejecting some of the nastier depictions of God in the Old Testament. It might seem like this interpretive approach is really intended to tame, or domesticate, God by reducing God to a harmless deity who is soft on sin But is that the case?

To be sure, understanding God to be nonviolent does result in a gentler, less lethal God than many textual portrayals suggest. Likewise, privileging the life and teachings of Jesus, which speak of God as one who is kind to the wicked and who loves enemies, certainly results in a "nicer" God than one who commands genocide and instantly annihilates people. But does that mean I have domesticated

God, that I have whittled away all the challenging aspects of God's character in order to end up with an easygoing, undemanding deity? Does it imply that I have removed all the difficulties associated with knowing and serving God, so that the God emerging from this reading of the Bible is one with whom I am fully comfortable? Hardly! There is nothing comfortable about a God who calls me to deny myself and take up my cross. There is nothing cozy about a God who tells me to love my enemies. There is nothing undemanding about a God who challenges my middle-class attitudes toward wealth and personal property by calling me to sell what I have and give to the poor. And there is nothing permissive about a God who calls me to repent or perish.

Just because a christocentric hermeneutic leads me to conclude that God is not the kind of being who commands genocide, instantly annihilates people, or judges nations by subjecting them to the horrors of war does not mean that I believe God is a spineless deity who could not care less about how people behave. What we do really matters to God. God abhors sin and is constantly encouraging people to make life-giving choices and to avoid doing evil. Furthermore, just because I do not believe God uses lethal force to punish people, as numerous Old Testament portrayals suggest, does not mean I believe God refuses to discipline people here and now. Like any good parent, God disciplines us so that we might mature and grow. I can attest to this divine chastening in my own life. When people go astray, God is present and active, ready to convict and correct as necessary. God always does so, however, *in ways that are congruent with God's character.* Thus, using a christocentric hermeneutic to reject violent, culturally conditioned portrayals of God neither diminishes nor domesticates God. Rather, it helps us move beyond barriers that keep us from seeing the true character of God more clearly.

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What I have proposed in this chapter is obviously not a foolproof way of determining the degree of correspondence between the textual God and the actual God. It is not possible to be absolutely certain that in every instance we have used the biblical text to think rightly about God. Such is the challenge of reading and interpreting Old Testament narratives. Still, applying a christocentric hermeneutic can help us put problematic portrayals of God in perspective as we attempt to discern the degree to which these portrayals distort or reveal God's character. Moreover, it reminds us that the reason for rejecting certain portrayals of God is not because they do not suit our particular theological preferences. Instead, it is because they fail to measure up to the God Jesus reveals.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus demonstrates familiarity with, and respect for, the Old Testament without perpetuating some of its most problematic views of God. For example, Jesus does not portray God as one who slaughters Egyptian children



or hurls down hailstones upon Canaanites. Jesus never even mentions God's role as divine warrior in the Exodus-conquest narrative despite the prominence of this motif in the Old Testament. In fact, Jesus rarely speaks about *any* of the problematic portrayals of God we highlighted in chapter 1. On the contrary, Jesus presents an alternative view of God, one that differs considerably from what we find in the troubling texts considered in this study. Since Jesus is the clearest and fullest revelation of God—a point developed at the beginning of this chapter—the view of God that Jesus reveals trumps all other views of God. The God Jesus reveals is the closest we get to seeing God as God really is. Therefore, this vision of God should function as the standard by which all other portrayals of God in the Bible are evaluated.

As we use the God Jesus revealed as the standard to evaluate other portrayals of God, we will inevitably discover numerous passages in which the "actual God" content is fairly low. We will find various portrayals of God that significantly distort rather than display the character of God, the living God. What are we to do in these instances? Should these portrayals and the passages containing them quickly be bypassed in search of greener pastures? Or are there valuable lessons to be learned from such texts despite their limitations? Questions like these are important for people who desire to use the Bible responsibly *and* constructively.

In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how problematic passages, even those containing portrayals of God we partially or totally reject, have something positive to offer the theologically resourceful reader. The challenge is to develop a way of reading these passages that allows us to be honest about the problems they raise without dismissing the valuable insights they provide.

31. Robert P. Carroll, *The Bible as a Problem for Christianity* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 42.

32. For a discussion of how to use these troubling texts in theologically responsible and resourceful ways, see chapter 12.

## Chapter 10: Evaluating Disturbing Divine Behavior by the God Jesus Reveals

1. Gareth Lloyd Jones, "Sacred Violence: The Dark Side of God," *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 20 (1999): 198.

2. See also the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11. Both individuals die because they lie about the selling price of a piece of land. Although the text does not directly suggest that God is responsible for their deaths, many interpreters believe this is implied.

3. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1999), 250.

4. Tremper Longman III, "The Case for Spiritual Continuity," in C. S. Cowles et al., *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 174.

5. Longman, "Case for Spiritual Continuity," 185.

6. For examples of other interpreters using a christocentric hermeneutic to deal with problematic portrayals of God, see especially Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Jesus against Christianity: Reclaiming the Missing Jesus* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2001); and C. S. Cowles, "The Case for Radical Discontinuity," in C. S. Cowles et al., *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 13–44. For a shorter treatment, see David Janzen, "The God of the Bible and the Nonviolence of Jesus," in *Teaching Peace: Nonviolence and the Liberal Arts*, ed. J. Denny Weaver and Gerald Biesecker-Mast (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 53–63.

7. This approach is particularly beneficial when using Scripture as a basis for Christian ethics. See, for example, Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), esp. 81–98.

8. See, for example, Phil. 2:5-8.

9. Here I follow Cowles ("Case for Radical Discontinuity," 22, 36) in appealing to Col. 1:15 and John 14:8-9 (discussed later in this chapter).

10. Cowles, "Case for Radical Discontinuity," 22.

11. Cowles, "Case for Radical Discontinuity," 42.

12. Quoted in Bruce A. Stevens, "Jesus as the Divine Warrior," *Expository Times* 94 (1983): 325.

13. Janzen, "God of the Bible," 57.

14. Janzen, "God of the Bible," 59.

15. Janzen, "God of the Bible," 61.

16. Jones, "Sacred Violence," 198.

17. For a brief survey of these quests, see N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 1–18. For an introduction to more recent attempts to identify the historical Jesus, see Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995).

18. This is most clearly evident in the Gospel of Luke, which begins with these words: "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed" (Luke 1:1-4).

19. It is anachronistic to speak of Jesus using the Old Testament since the Old Testament was not recognized as such until some time after Jesus.

20. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 218.

21. See appendix A.

22. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, Word Biblical Commentary 33a (Dallas: Word, 1993), 134.

23. Obviously, there are numerous passages in the Old Testament that contain depictions of God's extravagant mercy and grace. See chapter 12 of this book for a brief discussion.

24. Gerd Lüdemann, *The Unholy in Holy Scripture: The Dark Side of the Bible*, trans. John Bowden (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 128.

25. It would be more accurate to speak of this as the story of the woman *and man* caught in the act of adultery; however, given the patriarchal culture, the man unsurprisingly is not called to account.

26. Since the earliest and best manuscripts of the Gospel of John do not include this passage, many scholars believe it was not originally part of the Gospel of John. This does not imply that the story is inauthentic but indicates that when the Gospel of John was first written, this particular story was not located where it now resides. As Leon Morris (*The Gospel of John*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995], 779) observes: "Throughout the history of the church it has been held that, whoever wrote it, this little story is authentic."

27. Ben Witherington III, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 73.

28. Witherington, *Christology of Jesus*, 77.

29. John Dear, *Our God Is Nonviolent: Witnesses in the Struggle for Peace and Justice* (New York: Pilgrim, 1990), 2.

30. Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, "When God Declares War," *Christianity Today* 40 (October 28, 1996): 14.

31. For a collection of essays on the topic, see Stephen Jones, ed., "Is God Nonviolent? A Mennonite Symposium," *Conrad Grebel Review* 21 (2003): 3–55.

32. Cowles, "Case for Radical Discontinuity," 24.

33. Cowles, "Case for Radical Discontinuity," 24. For a critique of Cowles's explanation, see Eugene H. Merrill, "A Response to C. S. Cowles," in C. S. Cowles et al., *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 50.

34. Witherington, *Christology of Jesus*, 273.

35. This is clearly an allusion to Elijah in 2 Kgs. 1:1-16. Contra Cowles ("Case for Radical Discontinuity," 25), who believes it refers to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

36. For a list of the manuscripts and a brief discussion of evidence for and against the authenticity of this saying, see I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 407–408.

37. Cowles, "Case for Radical Discontinuity," 25–26.

38. For an alternate understanding, see Stephen Charles Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 178–83.

39. For a concerted effort to confront this trend, see J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001). For a variety of perspectives on the atonement as it relates to issues of violence and nonviolence, see John Sanders, ed., *Atonement and Violence: A Theological Conversation* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2006).

40. For a more comprehensive critique of penal substitutionary atonement, see Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000), 11–34.

41. For a recent collection of essays rethinking traditional understandings of the atonement, see Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, eds., *Stricken by God?: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007).

42. J. Denny Weaver, "Narrative Christus Victor: The Answer to Anselmian Atonement Violence," in *Atonement and Violence: A Theological Conversation*, ed. John Sanders (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2006), 25.

43. Dear, *Our God Is Nonviolent*, 49.

44. See George Aichele, "Jesus' Violence," in *Violence, Utopia and the Kingdom of God: Fantasy and Ideology in the Bible*, ed. George Aichele and Tina Pippin (London: Routledge, 1998), 72–91; and Michel Desjardins, *Peace, Violence and the New Testament* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 62–110, esp. 72–78.

45. See Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 332–36; and Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald, 1983), 250–55. Swartley has a chart that indicates the page references of where eight writers respond to twenty-four passages sometimes regarded as being problematic for pacifists.

46. See, for example, Matt. 25:31-46.

47. For a discussion of creation traditions in the Old Testament that suggest the use of violence in the creative process, see John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988).

48. J. Richard Middleton, "Created in the Image of a Violent God? The Ethical Problem of the Conquest of Chaos in Biblical Creation Texts," *Interpretation* 58 (2004): 355.

49. For examples, see chapter 8, note 20.

50. Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 145.

51. Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 554. Marshall does, however, allow for the possibility of this being a reference "to the destruction of Jerusalem."

52. Cowles, "Case for Radical Discontinuity," 27.

53. For further discussion of this point, see appendix A.

54. Gen. 18:25b.

55. Cowles, "Case for Radical Discontinuity," 30.

56. Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, "Ezekiel's Justifications of God: Teaching Troubling Texts," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 55 (1992): 114.

## Chapter 11: Using Problematic Passages Responsibly

1. Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 123 n. 7.



2. According Pamela Milne ("No Promised Land: Rejecting the Authority of the Bible," in *Feminist Approaches to the Bible*, ed. Hershel Shanks [Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1995], 47–48): "Feminists generally use the term 'patriarchy' to refer to the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children."

3. For a general orientation to this approach, see Edgar V. McKnight, "Reader-Response Criticism," in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes, rev. and exp. ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 230–52.

4. Eryl W. Davies, *The Dissenting Reader: Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible* (Aldershot, U. K.: Ashgate, 2003), 47.

5. Davies, *Dissenting Reader*, 46.

6. Davies (*Dissenting Reader*, viii, 94–99) is keenly aware that taking such an approach raises questions about biblical authority. If people can stand in judgment over the text, critique it, and ultimately reject aspects they find morally problematic, in what sense is the text functioning authoritatively? Although some might argue that such an approach undermines biblical authority, Davies disagrees. Instead, he argues that there is an inner-biblical warrant for engaging in this kind of honest questioning. This inner-biblical warrant is found in two kinds of Old Testament passages: (1) those that portray individuals questioning God's justice and which demonstrate a critique and reworking of earlier traditions, and (2) those that betray an "anti-patriarchal perspective." In both cases, Davies emphasizes that a critique of the Old Testament's "own values, principles and assumptions" is *already* part of the biblical witness (p. 95). Therefore, Davies believes that feminists who choose to critique patriarchy in the Old Testament simply follow in that same venerable tradition.

7. Davies, *Dissenting Reader*, 109.

8. Eryl W. Davies, "The Morally Dubious Passages of the Hebrew Bible: An Examination of Some Proposed Solutions," *Currents in Biblical Research* 3 (2005): 197–228.

9. Davies, "Morally Dubious Passages," 221–22, emphasis in original.

10. Rex Mason, *Propaganda and Subversion in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1997), 6–7.

11. Weems, *Battered Love*, 100.

12. Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 7, emphasis in original.

13. Ellen F. Davis, "Critical Traditioning: Seeking an Inner Biblical Hermeneutic," *Anglican Theological Review* 82 (2000): 749.

14. Davis, "Critical Traditioning," 734.

15. Thomas G. Long, "The Fall of the House of Uzzah . . . and Other Difficult Preaching Texts," *Journal for Preachers* 7 (Advent 1983): 17.

16. Long, "Fall of the House of Uzzah," emphasis mine.

17. Bernhard W. Anderson, *The Unfolding Drama of the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 13.

18. Ellen F. Davis, "Losing a Friend: The Loss of the Old Testament to the Church," in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures*, ed. Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky, Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 8 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 85.

19. Richard B. Hays, "Salvation by Trust? Reading the Bible Faithfully," *Christian Century* 114 (1997): 218–23. Similarly, Lapsley (*Whispering the Word*, 19) speaks of "a hermeneutic of informed trust," which "frees us to encounter God in Scripture . . . to expect that God